

ALONE OF ALL HER SEX

*The Myth and the Cult
of the Virgin Mary*

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ALONE OF ALL HER SEX

She . . . had no peer

Either in our first mother or in all women

Who were to come. But alone of all her sex

She pleased the Lord.¹

—CAELIUS SEDULIUS

PROLOGUE

We do not know, and never shall know, anything about the first origin of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past; but, as far as the present is concerned, it is certain that social behaviour is not produced spontaneously by each individual, under the influence of emotions of the moment. Men do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual; each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act. Customs are given as external norms before giving rise to internal sentiments, and these non-sentient norms determine the sentiments of individuals as well as the circumstances in which they may, or must, be displayed.²

—CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

INVOCATIONS TO THE VIRGIN MARY marked out the days of my childhood in bells; her feastdays gave a rhythm to the year; an eternal ideal of mortal beauty was fixed by the lineaments of her face, which gazed from every wall and niche.

On February 2, the feast of the Purification, we wore starched white veils of tulle that stood out around us like a nimbus. With the medals of the Sodality of Our Lady on blue ribbons round our necks, we processed with lit candles up to the communion rails to be blessed. In another convent school, on the same day, each young girl laid a lily at the feet of

the Virgin's statue: "Mary, I give you the lily of my heart, be thou its guardian for ever."⁸

The blue ribbons—blue is the colour of the Virgin, "the sapphire," as Dante wrote, who turns all of heaven blue—signified that the wearer was a child of Mary, and had dedicated herself to the Virgin and promised to emulate her in thought, word, and deed: her chastity, her humility, her gentleness. She was the culmination of womanhood. As my agnostic father maintained, it was a good religion for a girl.

Under the chapel there was a crypt, with a grotto of the Virgin made from chunks of cork oak from the Holy Land and hung all about with roses. On special occasions—the death of a pope, for instance—we were allowed to file into this darkened and scented place to kneel before the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes and recite our Hail Marys. The worship bit deep into our imaginations: I was no exception when, secretly and with intense excitement, I made myself my own grotto. Finding a rhododendron bush so old that its dusty dark green foliage framed a hollow chamber, I used to crawl in during breaks and after study hours and kneel to pray. "Holiness," as we called it, was natural, a part of living as simple as drawing breath. "She's so *holy*," we'd say in admiration of a classmate who spent particularly long on her knees before the thirteenth Station of the Cross: "Mary takes her beloved son to her bosom." Only moments before we had been stifling our giggles at that risqué word "bosom."

So our holiness was a shallow affair, although most of us considered with complacent resignation the vocation to the cloister, which might suddenly come upon us. Other Christians are often shocked by Catholic frivolity. Our religion was certainly untroublesome, because it consisted of simple certainties, outlined in the crisp rhetoric of the Catechism we learned by heart. And the Virgin was the chief of these certainties.

In her mercy, her sweetness, her overflowing goodness, she was incapable of withholding her favour if approached with the right courtesies and the correct salutations. The bond of motherhood that attached her to her son and to the whole human race through him presupposed a natural law of inalienable, irreducible, indestructible love. All the antiphons that pealed from the choir beseeching her to save us were, despite their imploring words, so much praise and thanksgiving. She did not really need to be asked.

We were not troubled by questions about the Virgin's personality, about what her life had been, what she had been like. We sometimes chattered about the colour of her skin—swarthy?—or the shape of her nose—Jewish? But we never probed history deeper, and although we did

study the New Testament, we never noticed—it was not indeed called to our attention—how the Virgin is passed over almost in silence.

The world of music, flowers, perfumes, and painting that enfolded her was filled with joy. It was only in the last two years at school, when I had been a devout Mariolater all my conscious life, that I felt the first chill wind sigh in this blissful pleasure dome. Doubts about doctrine caused minor tremors compared to the absolute misery that shook me when I was confronted, in puberty, by the Church's moral teaching.

For although the Virgin was steadfast, the human heart was faithless; although she never abandoned a votary, her votary could abandon her, and then, like Orpheus turning to grasp the vanishing shade of Eurydice, the intimate bond that once existed was severed. The price the Virgin demanded was purity, and the way the educators of Catholic children have interpreted this for nearly two thousand years is sexual chastity. Impurity, we were taught, follows from many sins, but all are secondary to the principal impulse of the devil in the soul—lust.

It is wry now to remember, at this distance, the terror this inspired: the children who spent the night cruciform on the dormitory floor after a "dirty thought," the tears of shame and embarrassment in the confessional after teenage gropings at lights-out parties. But even while the terror gripped me, I was already doubtful. Although I could not have articulated it then as I can now, I sensed that the problem of human evil was more complex than concupiscence—at least in its narrow sexual definition.

The Virgin, sublime model of chastity, nevertheless remained for me the most holy being I could ever contemplate, and so potent was her spell that for some years I could not enter a church without pain at all the safety and beauty of the salvation I had forsaken. I remember visiting Notre Dame in Paris and standing in the nave, tears starting in my eyes, furious at that old love's enduring power to move me. But though my heart rebelled, I held fast to my new intimation that in the very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women were subtly denigrated.

In this book I have tried, by exploring aspects of the Virgin's cult in Europe, to describe this paradox more fully. I started with a simple question: what was it I had worshipped? It is therefore the outcome of a private journey. But there are millions of Catholics who share the same experience. For almost all the 659 million of them in the world, the religious landscape encloses at its very heart the powerful and most beloved figure of the Virgin. Wayside shrines in Italy, with a poor plaster of Paris statue, a ring of cracked fairy lights, and a withered bunch of

flowers; the Angelus bell in France; even the dedications of village churches in England—once Roman, now Anglican—are fragments of the same myth that inspired Botticelli to paint the Virgin's portrait, that raised the spire and towers of Chartres, and that moved Dante to give voice in Paradise.

I have not pursued the historical Mary, the woman of Nazareth, because theology and belief have only rarely focussed on her. The reader will find nothing about life in Galilee in the first decades of our era. I have concentrated on the different aspects the Virgin assumes at different times and have attempted to uncover the convergence of circumstances that might have made such a symbol satisfying. The Virgin Mary has been formed and animated by different people for different reasons, and is a truly popular creation. That does not mean the "people" as opposed to the ruling classes or to the intelligentsia, for she has been the beloved patroness of saints as brilliant as Bernard of Clairvaux, or a pope as intellectually refined as Pius XII, or a king as gallant as Henry V of England.⁴ It is an insular assumption that—as one often hears in England—the cult of the Virgin is the refuge of a poverty-stricken peasantry.

The finer points of Mariology have always been and still are a delight to the subtlest and clearest thinkers in the Church. Four dogmas have been defined and must be believed as articles of faith: her divine motherhood and her virginity, both declared by councils of the early Church and therefore accepted by most of the reformed Christian groups; the immaculate conception, sparing her all stain of original sin, which was proclaimed in 1854; and her assumption, body and soul, into heaven, which Pope Pius XII defined in 1950. The Vatican is still pondering whether the Virgin Mary experienced death at all, and whether the traditional and widespread faith in her perpetual virginity—her unbroken hymen—*post partum* (after birth) as well as *in partu* (during), is necessary. With scholastic nicety, she is entitled to a special worship of her own—*hyperdulia*. God is owed *latría* (adoration) and the saints *dulia* (veneration), but Mary occupies the principal mediating position, as a creature belonging both to earth and heaven. Pope Paul VI has a learned and profound devotion to the Virgin, as his 1974 apostolic exhortation *Mariolis Cultus* bears witness. Since medieval times the aristocracy have opened their purses to build churches in her honour, to commission paintings, statues, masses, and votive crowns for her shrines. There are two colleges at Oxford placed under her patronage, although both—Oriel and New College—are known under their soubriquets.⁵ But she is also, as is more visible to the Mediterranean tourist, the focus of a vigorous and

fertile grassroots piety that knows nothing of Duns Scotus' casuistry or Pius XII's ratiocinations.

A myth of such dimension is not simply a story, or a collection of stories, but a magic mirror like the Lady of Shalott's, reflecting a people and the beliefs they produce, recount, and hold. It presents their history in a certain light and in a way that singles them out. For the Virgin is a protagonist in the drama of the Incarnation and the Redemption of Christ, and consequently in the personal salvation of each individual who feels himself to belong to Christian history and professes Christian beliefs. (Until the Reformation this applied to almost all Christians, but now it is restricted to Catholics, Orthodox, and High Anglicans.) Just as Aeneas provided Roman citizens with historical roots in the noble past of Troy and descent from the goddess Venus, his mother, and at the same time furnished a standard of conduct that they regarded as exemplary—Virgil's "pius Aeneas"—so the Virgin Mary, an ordinary woman who gave birth to Christ, in whom all found new life, becomes the symbolic mother of the Church, gives each of its members a part in God's plan, and also stands as a model of perfect humanity.

Myth, while providing a historical viewpoint and an ethical code for its adherents, also follows certain characteristic but easily overlooked patterns of thought. For instance, the Christian equivalence between spiritual impurity and bodily decay provides the basic argument behind the doctrine of the Assumption, which declares that the all-pure Virgin was spared the dissolution of the grave. In such patterns, the sacred and the profane, as well as human desires and fears, can to some extent be deciphered.

I have not undertaken a history of the cult of the Virgin as such, but in chronological order I have taken aspects of her composite personality at their zenith and then worked backwards and forwards in time showing the ideas that contributed to their genesis and growth and lingered on in the tiredness of old age. The idea of the Virgin's queenship had a value during the emergence of powerful kings in western Europe that it no longer has; but the image, stripped of its original strength, survives as a stock in trade of contemporary prayer and ritual. So although Pope Pius XII proclaimed Mary queen only in 1954, I have discussed the idea of her majesty at the point I consider it had maximum force: during the early middle ages. The most evident function of the Virgin today is intercession: she is prayed to for redress against private and public wrongs and to bestow graces of all kinds. Mediation has been the most constant theme of her cult, so in the later chapters about the different

areas in which her help is particularly sought, the reader will find much early as well as contemporary material. Throughout I have used iconography, because it cannot be stressed enough that most believers until modern times were illiterate, and the walls of the churches were their Bible. Although this method tends to present history as a smooth continuum, and to perceive the common culture of different nations and epochs rather than their differences, I feel such a perspective is justified in the case of a figure like the Virgin Mary, because she belongs to a vast community of people and represents a gradual accretion of their ideas, the deposit of popular belief interacting with intellectual inquiry, until, like the result of the coral insects' industry, a doctrine breaks to the surface like a new atoll. It is possible to probe this process only so far, however, and after consideration, I have avoided explanations arising from Freudian psychology. I do not think it is adequate to say that men will always yearn for a pure mother who will never let them down, and that that is why the Virgin Mary flourishes; one has to ask why purity and motherliness have been defined the way they have in the case of the Virgin and accept the fact that the ultimate reasons for her hegemony can never be fully understood. Nor does the Jungian archetype explain the myth of the Virgin Mary, for such figures are not innate, but cultural and historical products. I do accept, however, as the Jungians maintain, that such a symbol exercises a sway over our unconscious lives. The Virgin Mary is a manifestation of the principle the Chinese call *yin* and represents the quintessence of many qualities that east and west have traditionally regarded as feminine: yieldingness, softness, gentleness, receptiveness, mercifulness, tolerance, withdrawal. But whereas the Orient and to some extent Jung realized that both masculine and feminine qualities must be present in the whole individual in balanced measure, it has been the constant tendency of western thought, both when it was dominated by the Church and afterwards, to equate the feminine with the female of the species; and to insist that the female sex was and should be feminine, according to its definition. The Virgin Mary, a polyvalent figure who appears under many guises, is the Church's female paragon, and the ideal of the feminine personified. But, in the Church's attitudes to women, the oscillation between regarding them as equal in God's eyes (endowed with an immortal soul) and yet subject and inferior to the male in the order of creation and society ("And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee"—Genesis 3:16) has never ceased, and provides continual background interference to any discussion of the Virgin, the model of the sex, who accurately reflects this perennial ambivalence. Therefore, as when *yin* is defined its complement *yang* takes

shape by implication, so much of the matter that follows affects men as well as women, and defines the masculine as well as the feminine.

Whether we regard the Virgin Mary as the most sublime and beautiful image in man's struggle towards the good and the pure, or the most pitiable production of ignorance and superstition, she represents a central theme in the history of western attitudes to women. She is one of the few female figures to have attained the status of myth—a myth that for nearly two thousand years has coursed through our culture, as spirited and often as imperceptible as an underground stream.

EPILOGUE

In the sacred *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when Ishtar the goddess, queen of heaven, solicits the love of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk and greatest of mortal heroes, he turns on her in violence and reproaches her from the depths of his heart, not because she tempts his virtue, but because her love is a lie, a distortion, an illusion of splendour and beauty and security. Its aftertaste can only be wormwood and ashes, for it raises mortal aspirations far beyond any possible fulfilment, and so brings on despair.

As he bitterly rejects the goddess, Gilgamesh reminds her of her past lovers, including the hero Ishullanu, who also tried to withstand her blandishments. Ishullanu had told Ishtar: " 'What are you asking from me? My mother has baked and I have eaten; why should I come to such as you for food that is tainted and rotten? For when was a screen of rushes sufficient protection from frosts?' At this Ishtar struck Ishullanu and he was changed into a blind mole deep in the earth, one whose desire is always beyond his reach."

Then Gilgamesh asks the goddess if Ishullanu's fate does not await him also: "And if you and I should be lovers, should not I be served in the same fashion as all these others whom you loved once?"¹

It is a wise and profound passage, and indicts in a remarkable manner the Platonic yearning towards the ideal, which is the core of the cult of the Virgin Mary. For Gilgamesh reproaches the goddess Ishtar, first because she provides only "a screen of rushes" and that is insufficient "protection against frosts," and secondly because her love condemns a mortal to the pit, to gaze up with a mole's unseeing eyes at the dazzling skies.

Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar, but not her reality. He "believes" in her, but he quarrels with her dominion over the mortal world. To him, and to Ishullanu, and to the authors and the audience of the epic, her love is unacceptable and cruel because it asserts heaven's superiority and man's incapacity. Because Gilgamesh speaks from the standpoint of belief, he is rebelling against the given order that distinguishes human from divine, mortal from immortal, and rejecting the goddess who will always make him yearn for heaven. But to the modern reader, who no longer believes in the Babylonian pantheon, the reproach of Gilgamesh expresses tragically the irony of the religious man who quarrels with the deities whom

his culture has invented for not providing what he desires; and raises the tragic question, why do men, when they have purposely devised a mythological system that classifies them as separate and lower than the gods, seek to become like the gods?

Gilgamesh's words of bitterness do throw light on the worship of the Virgin Mary. For although to many of her devotees, like the old people in the home at S. Maria in Cappella, her love can seem a fortress against frosts, it is only a reed for the sinner who feels the frost-swollen wind of Christ's justice blowing down from heaven, while to the non-believer it seems a wretched placebo.

Gilgamesh also rails against Ishtar for transforming her lover into "a blind mole . . . whose desire is always beyond his reach." This is central to the myth of the Virgin Mary, who is theologically and doctrinally defined as wholly unique and yet set up as the model of Christian virtue. Of course the belief that man should constantly aspire to higher things has been fundamental to western moral philosophy since Plato; and to suggest otherwise could lead to accusations of antinomianism or quietism, neither of which do I hold. But it is worth considering the kind of ideal the Virgin represents.

First, she is presented as a fixed immutable absolute, and the historical process that changes the character of the Virgin is seen merely as a gradual discovery of a great and eternal mystery, progressively revealed. Mary did not become Mother of God at Ephesus in 431; nor was she assumed into heaven in 1950, when it first became an article of faith: these things always were. Indeed, the disregard of historical accretions with regard to the Virgin is so complete that it gives rise to tautology: the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception requires belief that Mary existed from all eternity, a fully-fledged concept in the eternal mind of the creator. When historical circumstances are admitted in evidence at all, they are treated as barnacles disguising the pure shape of the mystery. Pope Paul VI, in his 1974 apostolic exhortation on the cult of Mary, prizes off the encrustations, saying that many difficulties modern women experience in modelling themselves on the Virgin spring from "popular writings".

They are not connected with the gospel image of Mary nor with the doctrinal data which have been made explicit through a slow and conscientious process of drawing from revelation. It should be considered quite normal for succeeding generations of Christians in differing socio-cultural contexts to have expressed their sentiments about the Mother of Jesus in a way and a manner that reflected their own age.²

This "slow and conscientious process" is therefore seen to operate independently of "socio-cultural contexts," and the accumulation of new history, altering the shape of the myth—of which the pope's own document is another instance—is viewed as a stripping down to an old and absolute truth.

Roland Barthes, the French semiologist or reader of signs, writes that "in myth, things lose the memory that they once were made."³ In the case of the Virgin Mary, faith has simply wiped out the silt of history in her myth. It comes as a surprise to believers and non-believers alike that she is rarely mentioned in the Gospels, and is not even always called Mary.

There is another sector of thought that has nothing to do with the Catholic Church but also accepts the idea that the Virgin exists from all eternity. Under the influence of contemporary psychology—particularly Jungian—many people accept unquestioningly that the Virgin is an inevitable expression of the archetype of the Great Mother. Thus psychologists collude with and continue the Church's operations on the mind. While the Vatican proclaims that the Virgin Mother of God always existed, the Jungian determines that all men want a virgin mother, at least in symbolic form, and that the symbol is so powerful it has a dynamic and irrepressible life of its own. Roland Barthes again pinpoints this process with crystalline clarity: "We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature."⁴

This is the crux of the matter: for the moral concepts the Virgin expresses are presented as quite natural. By emptying history from the figure of Mary, all the various silks interwoven for centuries on the sensitive loom of the mind are deprived of context, of motive, of circumstance, and therefore seem to be the spontaneous expression of enduring archetypal ideas. Once the combination of historical and social circumstances is ignored, the reasons for such a symbol are also obscured, and the distortions and assumptions the symbol perpetuates in our lives become invisible.

Nothing it seems, even to non-Catholics, could be more natural than this icon of feminine perfection, built on the equivalence between goodness, motherhood, purity, gentleness, and submission. To take a random, visual example: in the beautiful school of Giotto panel now at Oxford (figure 52), the Virgin is serene, sagacious, exquisitely fulfilled as the Christ child on her arm reaches up and touches her cheek with his tiny hand and clutches at the neckline of her dress. She tenderly hovers with delicate tapering fingers to catch him if he struggles too vigorously. Her eyes, as in so much Marian iconography, gaze out beyond the picture

frame to dwell on an inner landscape of the soul, where tragedy and triumph are bound together, and her countenance is therefore wistful. Wistfulness seems also a natural quality of the feminine, a part of modesty and grace, a suitable expression of wonderment at her own beauty and mystery, a kind of hesitancy and humility that is hardly ever present in images of masculine beauty and goodness.

In such an icon as this school of Giotto painting—the beauty of which no one would deny, just as I am not saying that motherhood, purity, gentleness are evil or ugly in themselves—the interlocking of myth and ideology is camouflaged. Without any duplicity or malevolence on the painter's part, myriad assumptions are limpidly and luminously made. Assumptions about role satisfaction, sexual differences, beauty, and goodness are all wondrously compressed in this one icon, just as they are in every artefact produced by the cult of the Virgin Mary.

The concept expressed by the Catholic symbol of the Virgin extends further than the simple nobility of motherhood. She is the symbol of the ideal woman and has been held up as an example to women since Tertullian in the third century and John Chrysostom in the fourth lambasted the sex. The imitation of the perfected female type of humanity is still enthusiastically encouraged in Catholic families and schools from Ireland to Brazil. At one level, the purpose of woman and her fulfilment is seen to be motherhood, but at another the teleological argument is cut across by a major reservation, expressed succinctly in Canon Ten of the Council of Trent's twenty-fourth session: "virginity and celibacy are better and more blessed than the bond of matrimony" (*Melius ac beatius quam iungi in matrimonio*).⁵

Mary is mother and virgin; since the sixth century, when the marvelous *Akathistos* hymn hailed her as the one creature in whom all opposites are reconciled, her virgin motherhood has been the chief sign of her supernatural nature. Metaphysical mysteries must defy reason, for if the human mind could compass them, they would lose their sacred character. So Christ the God-Man and Mary the Virgin-Mother blot out antinomy, absolve contradiction, and manifest that the impossible is possible with God. But unlike the myth of the incarnate God, the myth of the Virgin Mother is translated into moral exhortation. Mary establishes the child as the destiny of woman, but escapes the sexual intercourse necessary for all other women to fulfil this destiny. Thus the very purpose of women established by the myth with one hand is slighted with the other. The Catholic religion therefore binds its female followers in particular on a double wheel, to be pulled one way and then the other, like Catherine of Alexandria during her martyrdom. Mary Douglas, the anthropologist,

discussing the ways different religions keep their hold on the faithful, describes this method of changing tack and setting ambiguous and divided goals. At one moment, a religion of this type declares that by obeying one moral code and performing certain rites correctly, the believer will prosper; at another, it spirits away this book of rules and substitutes another, contradictory one.⁶ Catholicism operates in a similar fashion, for on the one hand it affirms the beauty and goodness of the natural world and insists that man's purpose is to cultivate fully his God-given gifts on earth; but on the other it endorses the most pessimistic world-denying self-sacrifice as the state of the elect, and accords virginity, the symbol of renunciation, the highest accolade. When Pope Paul VI held up Mary as the New Woman, the model for all Christians, he expressed this impossibly divided aim without irony, in the immemorial manner of his predecessors. The Virgin is to be emulated as "the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city."⁷

The twin ideal the Virgin represents is of course unobtainable. Therefore, the effect the myth has on the mind of a Catholic girl cannot but be disturbing, and if it does not provoke revolt (as it often does) it deepens the need for religion's consolation, for the screen of rushes against the perpetual frost of being carnal and female. By setting up an impossible ideal the cult of the Virgin does drive the adherent into a position of acknowledged and hopeless yearning and inferiority, as Ishullanu so vindictively told Ishtar. The process is self-perpetuating: if the Virgin were not venerated, the dangers of sex, the fear of corruption, the sense of sin would not be woven together in this particular misogynist web, but would be articulated in a different way.

But the existence of the web prolongs the existence of the Virgin herself, who is represented as the only haven and the only solace. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, the anthropologist, has pointed out the circular character of religious fear:

... and if it were not for the existence of the rite and the beliefs associated with it, the individual would feel no anxiety, ... the psychological effect of the rite is to create in him a sense of insecurity or danger. It seems very unlikely that an Andaman islander would think it dangerous to eat dugong or pork or turtle meat if it were not for the existence of a specific body of ritual, the ostensible purpose of which is to protect him from these dangers. ... Thus, while one anthropological theory is that magic and religion give men confidence, comfort and a sense of security, it could equally well be argued that they give men fears and anxieties from which they would otherwise be free.⁸

In Catholic countries a woman's dugong, pork and turtle meat, are sex and childbirth. Mary's virginity underlines the pollution of intercourse; her freedom from the pangs of birth focusses exaggerated attention on them. In addition, the Church's teaching on contraception and abortion, which stems directly from the same misogynist ideas about women's role contained in the myth of the Virgin, exacerbates the terrors of sex and childbirth by maintaining pregnancy as a constant and very real danger. In turn, this reinforces the believer's need for solace, and swells the Church's authority and power.

The Virgin Mary is not the innate archetype of female nature, the dream incarnate; she is the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as a God-given code. The argument changes, according to contingencies. For instance, in 1974 Pope Paul VI, sensitive to a new mood among Catholic women, attempted to represent her as the steely champion of the oppressed and a woman of action and resolve. She should not be thought of, he wrote, "as a mother exclusively concerned with her own divine Son, but rather as a woman whose action helped to strengthen the apostolic community's faith in Christ."⁹ But the Vatican cannot simply strip away a veil and reveal Mary's metamorphosis into the New Woman unless it dredges centuries of prejudice. Its incapacity to do this is complete: the teleological view that the natural law ordains that women must bear and suffer underpins the Church's continuing indefensible ban on contraception; a dualistic distaste for the material world reinforces the ideal of virginity; and an undiminished certainty that women are subordinate to men continues to make the priesthood of women unacceptable.

Although Mary cannot be a model for the New Woman, a goddess is better than no goddess at all, for the sombre-suited masculine world of the Protestant religion is altogether too much like a gentlemen's club to which the ladies are only admitted on special days. But it should not be necessary to have a goddess contrasted with a god, a divinity who stands for qualities considered the quintessence of femininity and who thus polarizes symbolic and religious thought into two irreconcilably opposed camps.

The Virgin Mary has inspired some of the lofliest architecture, some of the most moving poetry, some of the most beautiful paintings in the world; she has filled men and women with deep joy and fervent trust; she has been an image of the ideal that has entranced and stirred men and women to the noblest emotions of love and pity and awe. But the reality her myth describes is over; the moral code she affirms has been exhausted. The Catholic Church might succeed, with its natural resilience

and craft, in accommodating her to the new circumstances of sexual equality, but it is more likely that, like Ishtar, the Virgin will recede into legend. For as Barthes has written:

Some objects become the prey of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear, others take their place and attain the status of myth. Are there objects which are inevitably a source of suggestiveness, as Baudelaire suggested about Woman? Certainly not: one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language.¹⁰

As an acknowledged creation of Christian mythology, the Virgin's legend will endure in its splendour and lyricism, but it will be emptied of moral significance, and thus lose its present real powers to heal and to harm.

Notes

Quotation and Prologue

1. Caelius Sedulius, "Paschalis Carminis," Book II, lines 68-9, *Sedulii Opera Omnia*, ed. John Huemer (Vienna, 1885). The original Latin reads: *Nec primam similem visa es nec habere sequentem: Sola sine exemplo placuisti femina Christo*. I have quoted it from the translation by Herbert Musurillo, S. J., who has changed it from the second to the third person, in *Symbolism and the Christian Imagination* (Baltimore and Dublin, 1962), pp. 112-13.

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, 1963), p. 70.

3. My gratitude to Joanna Sturm for telling me this story from her convent education.

4. In 1415 Henry V made a will before he left England on his French campaign. In it he said that he hoped to go to Abraham's bosom "through the prayers of Mary, the High Mother of God." He ordered that an altar dedicated to the Annunciation should be built over his tomb; that all extravagance should be avoided at his funeral, and that thirty poor men, if they recited daily the office of the Virgin, were to be fed and clothed for a year; three masses were to be said daily for his soul, to commemorate her Assumption and her Nativity and other feasts, and five thousand, eight hundred masses were to be said in honour of her Five Joys. After his signature he wrote: "R.H. Jesu Mercy and Gremery, Ladie Marie Help!" Joseph Lauritis, editor of John Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady* (Pittsburgh, 1961), believes that the king commissioned the poem in gratitude for the success of the ensuing campaign in France. Certainly Henry attributed the victory of Harfleur, which was fought on August 14, 1415, to the Assumption of the Virgin.

5. Oriel is the "House of the Blessed Virgin in Oxford" and was founded in 1326. New College is "St. Mary College of Winchester in Oxford," for it was founded by William of Wykeham in 1379, who also established Winchester School and dedicated it to the Virgin. Similarly Henry VI showed his devotion to the Virgin by dedicating to her his two great educational foundations: King's College, Cambridge (1440), and Eton College (1442).

Chapter 1: Mary in the Gospels

1. Helen Gardner, ed., *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford, 1972), p. 13.

2. Catholic tradition holds that Matthew is the earliest Gospel, though decisive biblical scholarship argues that Mark precedes Matthew. Matthew was first written in Aramaic, and then translated into Greek. The contemporary Catholic position is that Matthew's Aramaic version was written before Mark, but the translator of his Gospel into Greek (who is known as Matthew Greek to the scholars) used Mark to amplify the original Aramaic version. It is Matthew Greek who is responsible for the addition of the first two chapters about the birth and infancy of Christ. *The Jerusalem Bible, Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (London, 1966), pp. 5-10, discusses the vexed question of sources and dates most clearly.

3. S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (London, 1963), p. 169.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-8.

26. Chronica XXIV, *Generalum Ordinum Minorum*, tome 3: quoted in Raphael Brown, *Our Lady and St. Francis* (Chicago, 1954), pp. 76-7.
27. Mâle, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 150-5.
28. Paul Perdrizet, *La Vierge de la Miséricorde* (Paris, 1908), pp. 21 ff., traces the image of the Madonna sheltering singers under her mantle to a vision that Caesarius of Heisterbach, the Cistercian, describes in his *Dialogus Miraculorum*, written between 1220-30, in which a monk saw the Virgin sheltering the Cistercian order under her cloak. He points out that the gesture was "natural" because, although no antecedents warrant it in the Bible, it was common in legal custom and ritual: a legitimized or adopted child was wrapped in a cloak, and the suzerain draped his mantle over his vassal as a symbol of his protection.
29. Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, *Stabat Mater* in English, pp. 22-5. Philip Hendy, *Piero della Francesca and the Early Renaissance* (London, 1968), pp. 47-8.
30. John Mathias Haffert, *Mary in her Scapular Promise* (New Jersey, 1940).
31. St. Alphonsus de Liguori, *The Glories of Mary*, anon. trans. (Baltimore and Dublin, 1962); quoted in Briffault, *The Mothers*, 3:183.
32. Maria de Agreda de Jesus, *The City of God*, p. 569.

Epilogue

1. N. K. Sandars, ed. and trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. An English version with intro. (London, 1971), p. 85.
2. Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, Apostolic Exhortation (*Marialis Cultus*), February 2, 1974, section 36; p. 26.
3. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and trans. by Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), p. 142.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
5. Canon Ten, Twenty-fourth session of the Council of Trent, in Rev. J. Waterworth, trans., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (London, 1848).
6. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology* (London, 1973), pp. 87-8.
7. Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, section 37, p. 27.
8. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Taboo* (1939); quoted in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, 1963), p. 67.
9. Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, section 37, p. 27.
10. Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 110.

Appendix A: St. Luke's Magnificat

1. M. D. Goulder and M. L. Sanderson, "St. Luke's Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* (April 1957), pp. 20-2.

Appendix B: A Muddle of Marys

1. Jacobus de Varagine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. and adapted from the Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York, 1941), p. 520.
2. Adey Horton, "The Family Life of Jesus—the Unauthorized Version," *Sunday Times Magazine*, December 16, 1973.
3. O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages. Essays in the Origins and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 193-5.
4. André Grabar, *Christian Iconography, A Study of Its Origins*, p. 123.
5. Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 142; Briffault, *The Mothers*, 2:608.
6. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 87.